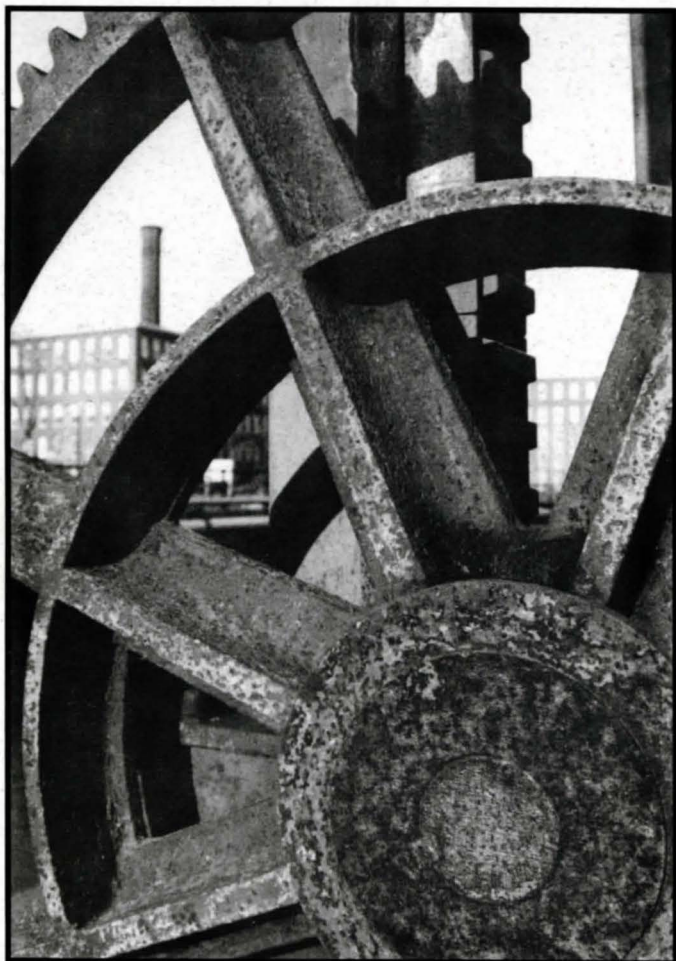


Volume IV

Issue 1

The Lowell Pearl



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Submitting to The Pearl

Send submissions to:

UMass Lowell Literary Society
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University of Massachusetts at Lowell
One University Ave.
Lowell, MA 01854

Please send two copies of your submission with no identifying marks on them: it is our policy to read submissions anonymously. Enclose with the submission a separate cover page which lists the title of the submission, your name, permanent mailing address, home phone number, and some background information (if we use your submission, we'll need information for the contributor's notes). Our reply will come a reasonably short time after the submission deadline.

To writers of prose—and truly ambitious writers of poetry—submissions should be no longer than 5000 words. To poets, please do not send more than five of your poems.

If you decide to send your submission on disk, it should be ASCII format, text only. Tell us the name of the system and application you are using.

We require an SASE for our reply.

If the above guidelines are not adhered to, we will not consider your submission.

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THE LOWELL PEARL

**Looking at *Le Bal a Bougival*,
Boston Museum of Fine Arts**

Sheila Golburgh Johnson

I remember coming here
rainy evenings to study art.
Hours I stared at this fine pair,
pausing in their graceful dance;

her skirt held up, eyes downcast.
I wondered, would I step so fair
caught in such a gentle grasp?
My colors have faded since that time;

lovers have danced me at the ball
and slowly dimmed. But Renoir's couple
dances yet, crowding the hall
with blue and white and red;

she still all blushing innocence—
and he, eternal sweet romance.

In China

Sheila Golburgh Johnson

The ginkgoes are not doing well in China.
They survive in cultivation now, near temples
where their fan shaped leaves tremble
in reverberations of temple gongs
and fall in silent ecstasy in autumn.

I have found their little golden fans
strewn upon the sidewalks of Boston
where they are ornamentals. I gathered
them by wiry stems to set in a glass
by my bed to sweeten my dreams.

I have seen ginkgoes with their scalloped
green fans at the Victoria Arboretum
in Australia when I was far from home
and lonely, and my hands opened
at the sight as if we were old friends.

Today I saw one on the lawn at Lotusland,
a garden where the White Lama once lived
and where the temple lanterns look like swollen
buds in lily ponds, and I heard the news—
but ginkgoes are not doing well in China.

Remembering Thoreau

Katherine Mercurio

"I did not wish to live what was not life."

I was fifteen, a sophomore that year
I learned about you and went to the woods to live
deliberately. I climbed an old oak,
lit a Marlboro, slowly inhaled the
rebellious air, watched drops from the misty
day balance on green leaves, and bark
turn suede on perspiring branches—it didn't
matter that I was skipping class. It was
Civil Disobedience. You could smell it
everywhere: in the gray ripples that cut
Walden Pond to pieces, in the pounding heart
of the Pines swaying in disarray—Oh,
yes, this would be worth getting caught.

I was, of course
—suspended for a week.
Nothing there but the
deep voice of the six foot dean
grabbing my ear
whenever I
imagined escape.

But I fooled him; because part of me did escape.
I am sure it walked back to Walden.
I am sure it traveled the same brown path
I shared with you that rainy spring day.
I am certain it walked to the water's edge
and set one foot into that sharp pool.

Shopping For Furniture

Katherine Mercurio

- I. Do not think I've forgotten
our last few years of marriage
a culmination of cocktails,
dinners, and social scaling
that turn my belly to bean bags,
my breasts to feather pillows,
my legs to liquor bottles
turned up-side-down.
- II. Do not think I don't notice
my face is a honey dipped hassock,
my hands are like oiled lanterns,
my hair hangs like yarn
to be braided into the rug.
Do not think I don't notice.
- III. You tell me "don't work." On Sundays,
we have parties and mudslides.
On Mondays, you work until nine;
I have last night's pasta and wine.
On Tuesdays, you go to work early
while I stay home and sleep in.
On Wednesdays you work late again.
On Thursdays, I go to the market
for Fridays' meals with the boss.
You say weekends are made for shopping.

- IV. Now at the furniture store,
you sit on the sofa with overstuffed arms
poking the cushions with sharp elbows,
raising your feet to the leather hassock,
leaning your back
into the red, plush pillow,
looking at the salseman nearby.
You smile and tell him we'll take it.

Spinning

Kiersten Conner

He was a man of powerful tongue. It was a fantastic tongue, really: long and pink and muscular. While he couldn't touch his nose with it, he could indeed touch the bottom of his chin, and while the length was impressive, it was dexterity which made his tongue truly scintillating. I suppose, actually, that Sean still is a man of powerful tongue. Just because he broke up with me doesn't mean he ceased to exist. Much less his tongue. That, you see, would truly be a shame.

Which is not to imply that Sean's tongue was his only attraction, although it probably would have been enough. He very much enjoyed the exploration of bodily orifices: my mouth, my ears, the hollow part of my neck above my shoulder bone, not to mention the numerous other orifices the exploration of which I prevented. To continue, he was quite tall, quite dark, and quite handsome, if a touch out of shape. His hair was dark and thick and probably added two inches to his height. But it was his chest hair that was truly stunning: across his unmuscled chest appeared a perfect rendition of the Pontiac Firebird. It was amazing the night I lost my virginity to him on top of the chemistry building last fall. The weather was quite brisk and we were quite drunk and he had taken me there to show me the view and I fell under the sway of his tongue. I cannot tell you how powerful it was,

seeing the firebird swooping down at me, over and over...

Actually, I can't tell you because it's not true. We weren't drunk. Or on top of the chemistry building. Actually none of it's true. Sorry. I never understood the phrase "losing your virginity" anyway. I mean, I haven't exactly been able to find it. It's not like your car keys or something. I don't know.

Anyway, we were sitting in this quiet little dive bar that we liked, glaring at each other over the blaring of the juke box and trying not to stick to the tables. It was right after we'd broken up, and everyone was telling me how well I was handling it while I was figuring out which one of his friends it would have hurt him the most for me to sleep with. It wouldn't have been hard: I'm quite attractive, although I don't like to admit it. I'm a dancer and very thin, with long dark brown hair, and breasts that I like to think of as lusciously ripe (which is good, because "pert" is probably the best I'd ever get from anyone else).

There was one day when I was in the library with Sean's best friend Todd. Todd is shorter than Sean and quite muscular, but I don't really know anything about his chest hair. Anyway, I thought maybe I could go at it with Todd in the middle of the library, say on the table using our notebooks as pillows. I decided against it, though. Todd's not really my type (and if I didn't know anything about his chest hair then I certainly couldn't know anything about his tongue), and besides, he's been going out with my best friend for over a year and she might not like it if we boinked in the middle of the library. He gave her a promise ring for Christmas. I'm not exactly sure what he's promising—judging from the way they act it may well be to break

up with her on or before Valentine's Day, but it's a pretty little bauble nonetheless.

So, yes, my story. You had probably thought that I'd forgotten. Always underestimating me, just like Sean. "Glaring at each other" is perhaps a statement far too flattering to your speaker: in truth, I was glaring at him while he flirted with every other woman in the place. I was trying to conceal my glare, however, with a fair amount of heavy drinking. "Feel unhappy? Drink a lot!" is a theory propounded by one of my good friends, and this was a night when I was feeling open to philosophical experimentation.

Sean was, however, glancing at me every so often. He was talking to Kate now, my best friend/Todd's soon to be ex-girlfriend. Maybe Kate and I could wallow together, I thought. Not that I really wanted them to break up— they look very cute together and would have very attractive, if short, children—but sometimes I just want someone to. Of course, I wasn't exactly thrilled when it ended up being us.

So you can see that I wasn't really in the best of all possible situations. It could have been worse, however, and I was indeed being an objectively good philosopher and Drinking A Lot.

Do not think, though, that I was merely drinking and glaring. I was also flirting quite prodigiously. Christian sat at my righthand, between me and the wall. I had been attracted to him for a long time, but he had never seemed quite my type, being attractive as he was. His hair was ash blond and curling, and his eyes were an almost violet blue. He had just been dumped by his girlfriend, Gina, whom he described as having the body of a goddess and the mind of lint. I pointed out that it was even more ignominious to be dumped

by lint than by your average Hormone Quarantine Zone like I was.

His eyebrows shot up. "You broke up?"

"Yeah." I sipped my gin and tonic.

"He broke up with you?"

"The day before my birthday. He didn't want to ruin it."

"Wow," he said, running a hand of long fingers through the curls above his eyes. "I had no idea—your birthday was a few weeks ago. I hadn't noticed at all."

I refrained from mentioning to Christian that the people Christian dated might be an accurate reflection of his cognitive powers. "Yeah, well, we really want to be friends." I gave him my best nonchalant, look-at-all-this-new-knowledge-we-have-of-each-other smile and shrugged. "The world will go on spinning."

He smiled back at me and put his arm around my shoulders for a moment. We commenced a game of Cleavage Quarters, a drinking game in which the object is to successfully bounce quarters into my blouse. The specific rules are unimportant; what was important was that the game progressed in such a manner as to actualize the theoretical ramifications of Drinking A Lot.

As we played I started thinking about the night that Sean and I broke up. It was actually the best talk that we had had in a long time. We were sitting in his room and had just had yet another gargantuan fight and he finally told me he wanted to end it. And we talked about it, calmly, rationally, and then ended up just talking about anything, babbling the way we had before things turned so bad. He finally asked me why I remained so calm about the whole thing.

"I'm not going to burst into tears and beg you to

stay," I said, playing with the band of my watch.
 "We'll be good friends. We'll probably get along a lot better this way."

So there I was, sitting in the bar, feeling the cool metal of the coins slide down my chest when Kate came up from behind me and grabbed my shoulder.
 "Come on, Lizzie, I want to talk to you."

"All right," I said. Coins jingled to the floor as I stood up, after giving Christian a deliberate view of my cleavage. "Now, remember where we were," I said as Kate pulled me away by the hand.

Moving was proving to be a little difficult. "Oh my god, isn't he cute?" I said as we sat down at the bar and I waved toward Christian. "I'm so in lust. I want another drink. Oh, wait—what do you want?"

Kate sat looking at me and shaking her head. "I want you to stop making a fool out of yourself."

"Oh, come on, sweetie, I'm so good at it! Where's that damn bartender—"

"Liz, you don't need another. And why are you acting like that in front of Sean? You're driving him crazy. It's just not a nice thing to do."

"Look, Kate," I said. "He broke up with me."

"I know, honey, but—"

The room was spinning and spinning and I held on to the bar for support. "He's been flirting with every woman in the place and he broke up with me and I'm supposed to be nice?"

"He was talking to me and Todd all night, Lizzie."

I started crying. I just held on to the bar and looked at her and let tears slide down my cheeks.

"I can't do it anymore," I said. "I just can't. I can't be good about it. My whole philosophical basis used to be thrown off every time he got his hair cut and he just

broke up with me..."

I was sobbing now, sitting on this bar stool. Kate gave me a long hug. "Do you want to leave?" she whispered.

I nodded. "Yeah, let's go."

Sean must have been watching this whole scene take place, because when Kate and I stood up he was standing in front of me.

"Do you want to talk?" he said, shrugging slightly and holding his hands out toward me.

"No," I said, "I really don't." And I turned around and walked out of the bar.

Plan B

Richard Zidonas

I'm leaning against my ambulance watching the end of the last race waiting for something to happen. Two cars are scrapping for the lead, side by side, while a third, Oats—Harry Sow-Your-Wild Oats—that's what's painted on his car—keeps smacking them from behind. What a bull ring! But no one is giving an inch of position, not an inch, not even when the flagman waves the white. But with one lap to go, somebody is going to have to damn well give something pretty quick like.

Oats gets desperate. Third place ain't no place for Oats, you know? Which makes you wonder what he's thinking about when he backs off the throttle. I mean, he's losing ground fast. It really looks like he's giving up. I mean, he's about twenty feet behind the front runners as they get set to drop into turn one.

Anyway, the guys up front tag the binders just a bit to get into the corner. Oats doesn't. And son-of-a-gun... His car is centered on theirs like the leg on the letter Y. Bam! He tries to smash his way through. But it doesn't work. Then, with what must be plan B, he slides into three to pass.

Three in the corners is suicide. Parts and pieces of parts and dirt and stones and broken nuts and bolts and hotdog wrappers and crunched beer cups and, ...well, if it ain't nailed down, it's out there in three, and it's so doggone slick, out there, that banana peels go there for training.

But he's out there, slipping every which-a-way,

which is enough to give most guys religion, which would be just fine with this crowd as they're jumping and whooping and hollering like they're at an evangelical revival and Oats is about to be saved, though somehow I doubt it.

But he's out there, planted in the grease squirming left and squishing right—looks like he's on black ice, but what's really funny is he catches the guys up front, and you know they got to be getting mighty p.o.'d about now. It just isn't nice to get blown away by someone out there in greasy land.

Now they're side-by-side on the backstretch and getting set to dive into three. They're so close together they look like teeth in a crooked smile, and you know, that Oats knows, that everybody knows, that the checkered is about to fly—which might explain why all three go into the turn so hot and heavy that there's no chance in hell that anybody's gonna make it.

The guy in lane one is the first to get squirrely. He gives the guy in two an I-don't-love-you-anymore whap. Number two, figuring he's not wanted, slides high and wide to cry about it with the guy in three, Oats.

The group enters the straightaway everyway but right. The nose of the first car is kissing the behind of the second, maybe an apology of sorts. Oats, on the high side, is doing a nose to tail, bump and grind, down the side of number two, and, if that's not enough, if they weren't already jacked way out of shape, the whole lot of 'em is about to find the wall.

Oats gets there first, and it's as if his car doesn't know any better. It drives up the side of the wall. First Oats is on four tires, then two tires, then no tires. Impressive.

The other two are hot on his trail. They're into the wall, then they're not. They come off the wall sideways, cars nose to nose, staring at each other, looking like a head-on crash that can't quite get it done. But, no matter, the end is near. The now upside down Oats is sliding along in front of them, making like an upside down roadblock.

Kaboom! Tires are smoking, metal is screeching, busted radiators are gushing steam, sparks are flying like it's the Fourth of July. Pieces of stuff are everywhere. The front stretch is so messed up with junk that some snooty people would probably think it's a collection of modern art.

The starter waves the checkered flag with one hand and the red with the other as the whole twisted, smoldering, gawd-awful mess slides across the finish line. Everything comes to a screeching halt as Mr. Ambulance and I are sent out to hunt for survivors.

I head for the upside down number three, Oats, and I get to him just as he unclamps his safety harness and falls down to the roof of his car. I'm watching him crawl out through what was his front window when he asks me if he won the race. I tell him no, that he came in an upside down third. He laughs!

I ask him just what the hell is he laughing about. I ask him just what the hell was he doing? He looks at me. He looks at my ambulance. He looks at me, and he says, "Never send to know for whom the siren wails; it wails for thee."

I mean, that's what he said. How can you forget something like that? So I say, "What?"

He says, "Time's winged chariot hurrying near." But he didn't say winged with one syllable, he said winged with two, Time's "wing ed" chariot. Then, if

that wasn't enough, he looks at me and asks, "Which for you?"

Spooky! I'm really thinking the guy's bashed his head in. I mean, he's talking nuts. So I get some kind of look on my face and Oats must have noticed, 'cause he puts his hand on my shoulder and he says in this polite, easy-going voice that he's fine. He says, "Thank you for coming to get me, but I won't be riding with you tonight, Mr. Time." And then he says that he didn't mean to frighten me—me! Like I get frightened. He says he's just working toward his life's goal.

Mr. Time? He can't read David Eathan's Ambulance Service? So, I say, "Really, Mr. Oats"—I can be formal, too—"just what is your life's goal?"

He says his life's goal is to be alive when he dies. I say to him, "Alive when you die?"

He says, "You got it, Mr. Time, alive when I die." "Right," I say, "like everybody isn't."

But he doesn't say anything. He just turns and bows to the standing ovation of the crowd, and he waves to his fans as he starts to walk down the track to the pits.

So I yell to him that he didn't win the race, that he came in third. And it stopped him. He looked at me. He looked at my ambulance. He looked at me. And he laughed. Again!

Well, I just let him go, no use fighting about it, but I keep watching him, and I got to tell you, it turns out to be pretty interesting. Usually I get there after the fact—it's not that I don't know where I'm supposed to be, you know, it's just that I'm usually running late.

Anyway, I'm sitting there, in my ambulance, watching him as he limps down the track—he must've bumped his knee or something in the wreck. He

coughs a couple of times. He limps a few steps. He stops and coughs a couple of more times. He rubs his elbow—he must've bumped that, too. He stops to light a cigarette, but he can't do it. His hand is shaking too much to make it happen. He rubs his elbow again. All in all, ain't no doubt about it, at the moment he's a pretty hurting dude.

Meanwhile, up ahead of him, just a bit, down the track, the starter is putting away his flags. He rolls them up, one by one, and puts them in this case full of tubes he's got.

Anyway, the starter is rolling up his flags and he kind of accidentally shakes the white one just about in Oats' face as he passes by—some of the guys said it was my doing, but I'm telling you here and now it wasn't.

Anyway, I chuckle because the flag's so right. But it's a coincidence. It really is. I mean, hell, these things are planned way in advance. I mean, flag or no flag, it didn't matter, did it? It was gonna happen.

Oats passes by the flagman and starts to limp into the final turn when this pain hits him so hard, smack in the middle of his chest, that I swear I could feel it halfway across the track, and his hands, with their fingers all spread out, jump to his chest like they're trying to keep his body from coming undone.

Oats gets desperate. His eyes try to find something to hold on to, but there ain't nothing there, so his body does a slow kind of spin and drifts out toward the wall. He stumbles over something in the greasy groove, and it's as if his body doesn't know any better. One leg trips the other and he starts to fall, and he reaches for the wall as he heads for the asphalt.

He wavers for a second, then he locks in on my

ambulance—like I could help him—and he does this clumsy-looking, hand-over-hand, silent, spinning dance down the safety cable along the side of the track, and he eventually wobbles right to the spot where he rolled his car.

He reaches out for another handful of cable and comes up empty. He loses his balance. First he's on two feet, then he's on no feet, then he's on his knees, and for a piece of a second it looks like he's praying. Then, he buckles in two and does this real slow, real quiet dive into the track.

Bam! He hits. He flattens out, and he does a barrel roll down the banked turn. His body is heading for the infield, but it never gets there. And it's something to see. The last half-turn of his body takes forever to happen. Time must have gone goofy for a bit or something. Maybe it's a flashback thing, I don't know. The last half-turn looks like one of those slow-motion TV replays you see all the time. And I'm waiting and waiting and waiting. Finally, I hit the switch for the siren just as his body—and his life—come to a screeching, belly up, it's-all-over-but-the-shouting halt.

Mr. Ambulance and I are not sent out to hunt for survivors. And the crowd doesn't go wild. But I got to tell you, I like it. Most of my pickups are so boring. But Oats put on a good show. And I'm pretty sure he was alive when he died.

I mean, some people feel death creeping around in the shadows, and it scares them so much they go into hiding years before death gets there, and they try to chase death away with carrot sticks, or they try to make it something nice by getting on their knees, or both, you know? But not good old, let's-try-the-greasy-groove, Sow-Your-Wild Oats, Harry. No way.

But I don't know. Never did. Still don't. Can't see that I will. I can't imagine that death cares how you got there. But, who's to say? Not Oats. Like Oats cares, now. Like Oats is better off than some old, wrinkled geezer somewhere snoozing in the noonday sun.

But that Mr. Time business slays me. What a hoot! Man, the guys loved it.

This Body and Me

Holly Day

outside
streetlights wink up at my window, flickering red,
green, against the curtains. I used to pretend
the city was a Christmas tree
when I was little
never realizing the bright glare killed the stars.
In this light, we're so perfect together—
you're never awake when I'm beautiful.

you lay so quiet against me
you never move in your sleep—your peace
is hypnotic, your heart
sings my body to sleep.

Feast Day (North End, Boston)

Lewis Hammond Stone

Through unawakened narrow streets
 Summer festive heat bakes cobblestones
 Worn smooth by tread of oldtimers
 "Paisans" who still walk this procession
 Where their Lord is seated
 His throne lifted on wooden poles
 Blistering arms and shoulders
 With a burden of the past
 As slowly shuffling feet
 In an almost forgotten pageant
 Of old men faces wizened
 Puckered like brown olives
 Precious oil long gone
 Their dark baggy pants
 Roped high atop protruding bellies
 Shackling them with notches of servitude
 Shining silver tubas and trombones
 At ready lips that have tasted
 Joyful homemade wine from earthenware jugs
 Impregnated with generations of memory
 Without allowing the adulterated present
 To interfere as these Roman soldiers march
 Their sweating bodies labor
 Under watchful eyes of God
 Blessing those who grow and wilt and die

At every rest the faithful
 Pin money to the plaster effigy
 Never drawing blood
 But smiles of adoring praise
 From women dressed perpetually in black

Always ready for a funeral
 Between smells of frying garlic and onions
 Overpowered by whiffs of gorgonzolla
 More pungent than rotting corpses feet
 Strong enough to halt traffic
 From Hanover Street to the tunnel
 Frustrated motorists on this feast day celebration
 Stuck in lines of local pilgrimage
 Impatiently wait for tradition to finally pass.

On Loving. . . .

Anonymous

Amazing how quickly
They move

To the other side
Of the room:

You'd think I smelled,
Maybe looked a little "odd. . ."

But no,
It's you.
It's because I love you—

You with your eyes
That see too much
And judge so little—
You with your smile
And laugh that says
"It's really not all that bad,"

Inviting me to find
The soothing warmth within
Your arms,
Rest my head
Upon your breasts—

Yes, you, my friend,
They say I should not love—
And here, alone, I sit . . .

Except for you, my love
That I should not love,
Except for you, my beautiful friend.

Ode to a Boa

Barbara Bennet

They say
You are cursed
To glide on your belly
Because of that first serpent.

The real Original Sin.

Do you know?
Women fear you
And men mistrust you
Punctuating their misunderstanding
With shovels and sticks.

Our gazes meet
You stare at me
With unblinking eyes
Tongue tasting in rhythm
Accepting of your destiny.

Content, serene
You move steadily
Toward my soul
Freeing puffs
Of cold breath.

At the First Meeting Of The Nomenclature Committee

Shirley Warren

They met unexpectedly on this traveling green rock of a watery planet, the only earth they'd ever seen, and all the wild beasts were represented. Good dirt lay underfoot. A canopy of deeply etched leaves and clouds of every configuration curled above. Things vivid and dull colored, large and small, feathered and petaled, skittered overhead or spread thick and bright across the garden floor. Some creatures crept between the rocks or bathed in sunlight. Some waved their fins in brackish water. And inside these many visible things were hidden many further things—eggs, seeds, rubies and pearls, bones and rain, sap, snow, teeth and ideas, thoughts, and more. But none of these things, or the things they were in, had names. The committee wanted words for themselves, for the earth and its features—the living things and the molten things, the bedrock things and the swimmers, the frozen things and the shifting grains. So each thing came with its own small language, ready to share its private treasure of words. But each word from each thing centered

on that thing only, and pointed outwards from it, and drew all the other things of the world in toward it. Even those things that would never in Earth's history speak wanted the budding nomenclature to develop along their personal wordline. TREE, for example, would have named what we now refer to as BLUEBIRD "THE TREEWALKING FEATHERS"—if TREE could have had its way. So it went at the first meeting of Earth's Nomenclature Committee. And so it continues today. For this reason, whosoever has speech on Earth speaks from the inside out, and whosoever hears is doomed to hear from the outside in.

Early Morning Migration

Shirley Warren

Strong coffee,
softened by a fresh
finger of cream, rushes
hot over my morning
tongue, hits the hollow
below my breastbone
with a slightly acid splash.
The taste of my life
is biting, but sometimes
sweet, and smooth
as a mud-wren's nest. Today
the backyard sand, autumn
cool, twitters with the dark
sweep of wings—jittery
swallows feeling the warm
tug of survival. I sip and sip,
watch and watch. The dream
I dreamed just before dawn
was a usual dream, and I am
a usual woman: My migrations
toward love have been wide;
my shoulders, braced for flight.

Spring Music

Shirley Warren

The hiss of sporadic traffic creasing the quiet air,
the newly arrived songbirds plucking the dead

twigs of winter to weave their cuplike nests,
the wind humming up high like bowed strings

in the still bare oaks—my heart's the gardener
without a plot, my hunger's for something rich

and dark. Somewhere in my sandy yard, a seed
thinking of thirst turns belly-up in the sun

and somewhere farther out, a colony of bees
is gearing up to gather. New at love, my son

makes songs about loss. In another time, I would
perch with him at piano, teach him the other song.

Reach Out and Touch

Mary Wiles

When it is finally night time, every muscle in her body aches, and Sharon, too early she thinks, crawls into her bed. The day, sunny and warm, had not gone well; two of her staff called in sick, three of the toddlers were teething and cried miserably throughout the day, and almost half the 5:30 fathers were more than twenty minutes late. It made more work for her; and while she usually didn't mind, today was different. The day-to-day operation of her day care center was always a challenge; she usually felt very good by bed time.

But the day had not gone well and something doesn't sit right with her. On top of everything else, her assistant forgot to send in the next month's milk order for the third time in as many months. *I can forgive that, I suppose*, Sharon thinks, but it is yet another mistake on top of too-frequent questionable sick time requests that makes the situation unbearable. As she searches for a comfortable position in bed, Sharon thinks, *How can I fire him when I'm short-staffed? But I have to fire him, he's incompetent; he's a jerk. I know.* It is not the first time she comes to that conclusion.

When the phone rings, long past midnight, jarring her out of an unsuspected but pleasant dream, Sharon's first thought is that it is Jack calling back for her and she sits up abruptly, heart pounding. She opens her eyes wide and comes out of that semi-aware state that surrounds and cushions dreams and she wonders if the caller will be Elaine. Elaine has not made her regular cycle of calls for awhile, Sharon remembers; Elaine is overdue.

In what little moonlight makes its way into the bedroom in Sharon's section of the rented house on the Common, Sharon can see her red-rimmed glasses where they rest on the night stand by her books and pictures. She hesitates, wishing that the ringing will stop and she can go back to her dreams. But by the time the shrillness pierces the night for the sixth time, she knows for certain it has to be Elaine and that the phone will ring forever unless she answers it. Her hand reaches out to grab the receiver. She knocks her glasses to the floor, where they lightly bounce along the carpet and disappear silently under the double bed.

Elaine, Sharon knew, ignored everyone not directly involved in her latest cause. Her bosom friendships blossomed overnight only to be discarded within months, when Elaine's attention was quickly and abruptly caught by something else. Sharon watched Elaine abandon first one interest, then another; she often wished she could forewarn Elaine's latest group of friends of the inevitable outcome, but Sharon lacked the drive, the nerve, the compulsion that Elaine had in abundance. Sharon had her sarcasm, some bitterness, and a dislike of Elaine that came and went, even as Elaine's causes were born, blossomed to maturity and just as quickly, died.

Elaine had taken Sharon's \$150 and a carton of cigarettes after her altercation with the Harvard police, but had refused to listen to Sharon's advice that she lie low. "That demonstration was nothing," Elaine insisted, despite the fact that three of the demonstrators had been arrested and two others ended in hospital emergency rooms. "They can't do anything to me without a lot of negative publicity. The media would tear them apart. The group would see to it."

Sharon remembered well the five members of that particular group, Jack's group, people she had become

fond of and close to, before Elaine again barged into Sharon's life, taking over Sharon's friends, creating her own small circle. Sharon did not know how to react to them after the inevitable happened and Elaine's interest in their music and friendship went the way of the real estate career, the plan to live off the land, the life in a loft on the waterfront in the city—"All for art, of course. My life for art." All ideas Elaine tried on, modeled for a short time, then discarded when she decided the outfit really wasn't her after all, and what had consumed her was forgotten.

"I had to call you," the breathless voice says. Sharon can tell that the owner of the raspy-throated voice is on the verge of yet another crisis. She waits; she knows better than to respond yet. Elaine blunders on without a pause for a word of welcome from Sharon.

"It's so very awful, I can't even believe it." She stops briefly and Sharon hears the snap of a match, the quick-sucked inhale of the freshly-lit cigarette, one of many Elaine will chain-smoke for the length of the call.

"I'm really worried and scared," she finally whispers, pausing again, while Sharon waits.

A long time ago, after Sharon moved out of their parent's home into a sunny, secluded apartment of her own, Elaine sat at Sharon's dining room table, forking up spoonful after spoonful of chicken curry with rice, forking over her opinion on theater, the state of the Broadway-bound shows as well as the badly-produced small-town attempts, and without a pause in her monologue completely surprised Sharon by announcing, "I don't give a shit about you, actually."

Sharon sat dumbfounded and unable to respond; hindsight now tells her she should have kicked Elaine

out the door and locked it behind her, severing her cleanly. But severing doesn't always work with Elaine, Sharon reminds herself, because Elaine won't let it work unless it's to her advantage. So she now waits for Elaine to continue.

"I don't know why you don't like to talk to me," Elaine says, exhaling loudly and coughing slightly without moving the phone away from her face. "You'd think I was an ax murderer the way you treat me sometimes, Sharon, and it really isn't fair. After all, what have I ever done to you?"

There were silent, hot tears that summer morning when Jack came to Harvard to break his bad news to Sharon. He stood far away from her, his shoulders hunched as if protecting himself from something, facing the window, his long hair disheveled, staring out into the street below. At first, Sharon didn't believe him; despite the heat, she felt nothing but cold. She wouldn't believe what he was saying, not really. That he would leave for anyone but Elaine. It didn't make any sense; but it made more sense than she was willing to admit.

Then, with a sudden belief came her quiet anger, and she wanted to rush over and kick him where he stood, silently now, by the window with the sun changing him into a black shadow, blinding him to her. But she could not move. It wasn't really happening, Jack was not going to walk out on her to go to the West Coast with Elaine. They talked too long about Elaine; she thought he knew what kind of manipulator Elaine was. Sharon's tears fell silently, finding their way to the tight crack of her mouth as she pressed her lips together to keep from crying aloud. She and Jack re-

mained that way for what seemed like hours, Jack standing up by the window and Sharon down in the rocking chair. Then Jack walked out, leaving more than he took with him, before Sharon gathered the courage to even ask why.

"Really, Sharon, things couldn't be worse," Elaine almost yells into the phone. This time she waits, pausing long enough to let her sister answer.

"Hello, Elaine, it's three o'clock in the morning, not that it matters," Sharon mutters. She sits up in bed, mounding the pillows as best she can behind her, using one hand. The other grips tightly onto the phone. She does not turn the light on yet. She waits.

Elaine bursts into tears. "I don't understand people, really, Sharon. It's too scary, the campaign out here, you know." Elaine lights another cigarette and exhales loudly. "It's not going well and I'm scared shit what will happen if Reagan really gets elected."

Sharon smiles slightly at Elaine's latest concern. She heard from their mother that Elaine was caught up with a group working diligently against Reagan's presidential aspirations. Sharon leans to the left in her bed and searches for the switch, deciding after all that she needs light.

It was too bright, too light that snow-blind morning years ago that the bus stalled half-way up Killer's Hill on the way to school. The forty kids en route to the Immaculate Conception School screamed, not in fear that the bus would lose its precarious hold on the icy roadway, but in joy that they were so very late and would miss most of religion class and maybe part of math, if they ever did get to school.

Elaine was there in the midst of the hot and restless

horde, tossing books, stealing hats, yelling and laughing with abandon. Sharon sat in her corner of an overcrowded seat, trying to push the noise away, watching Elaine and watching the driver, steering the bus wheels slip ever-so-unnoticeably backwards on the slick blanket of snow.

Then Elaine was standing on her seat, jumping up and down, beating on the ceiling with her torn green book bag. "Let us off the bus!" she screamed, then started to chant: "Let us off the bus, let us off the bus." And continued while the rest of the children took up the cry.

Helplessly the bus driver watched, catching Sharon's eye in the rear-view mirror. Sharon shrugged her off, and turned to stare out the window as Elaine made her move.

"Freedom!" Elaine cried and the emergency exit slowly swung open, lights flashing and buzzers buzzing. "Sharon, come on!" And she jumped the two feet down from the bus onto the street below, steadied herself as she slipped, then headed towards home. If she had been afraid, like Sharon, she never showed it.

It is that same determined seven-year-old calling Sharon now from across the country. Twenty years may have passed, but not much else. Sharon slides out of bed and kneels, still gripping the phone as she pats the floor beneath the bed, trying to find her glasses.

"I'm right here, Elaine," she says.

"I mean, really, things suck. We're busting our asses for Mondale and these assholes are too insensitive to be believed. How can they believe the shit that's being fed them by that jerk-off? Can't they see through him? Doesn't anyone worry about another world war? With the arsenal he's built up, damn it, are you even

listening?"

Sharon puts her glasses on her head and sits cross-legged on the warm floor. She thinks about how the latest flu has decimated her staff at the day care center, what she will do about the milk order, and how her own lack of sleep will make for another rough day. She glances at the clock next to Jack's picture on the night stand and wonders just how close to morning Elaine's phone calls are going to last this time.

"Do you want comfort, sympathy, devil's advocacy, or what?" she asks.

"Oh, fuck you."

Sharon smiles as she lowers the receiver down onto her crossed leg, listening to the dial tone that clicks in within fifteen seconds after a caller hangs up.

Her tiny living room is dark, the only light coming from behind her down the short hallway between the bedroom and kitchen. Sharon brings her cup of tea to the window, where she brushes some dust off the thin, burgundy drapes. The prism that hangs from the curtain rod was a present from Jack. She taps her finger lightly against it and listens to the rhythmic *pings* it makes against the glass. She sips at the bitter tea.

"Come on, Elaine," she says aloud to the empty room. "Let's get this over with so I can get a bit of sleep before morning."

Sharon remembers another far-away time, one of many, that Elaine either kept her awake long after midnight, or jarred her awake with yet another major crisis. Elaine jumped on the bed, excited about Alex Grady and the dance they had just been to, the new music, the loud people, the rum secretly poured into the cokes passed out to any dancers who asked.

Elaine jumped up and down on Sharon's bed in a sloppy rhythm, ashes from her cigarette showering down on Sharon as she tried to move away from Elaine's heavy, too-close feet. Elaine insisted that Sharon wake up and "listen to this great song. I can sing it, too." It was an Aretha Franklin number; Elaine couldn't carry a tune to save her life.

"What you got, baby I want it," she shouted into the night.

"You've got it wrong, Elaine," Sharon told her. "It's 'What you *want*, baby I got.'"

Elaine shrugged and kept on jumping. "Same difference to me," she said.

Sharon slowly turns from the wide window in the living room and sits down in the oversized rocker that allows her an unobstructed view of the hills beyond her street. She rubs her eyes, watching the prism as its rocking rhythm slows down, and she resists an impulse to tear it down.

She yawns again. She has to open up the center by 7 a.m. If Elaine stays true to form, there will be two or more phone calls before her soul will be satisfied with her latest attempt to communicate with her older sister. Sharon's tea is cold, but she tightly grips the mug, searching for the last little bit of warmth, rocking and waiting and listening to the silence surrounding her.

The rocking chair was a present from Uncle of saying 'I told you so' cause I knew, I just didn't let on."

"What happened?" Sharon asks.

"Oh God," Elaine's voice breaks. "I don't know, really I don't. Is it me? Why do I connect with nothing but total idiots?" She pauses, and in the brief silence, Sharon can see Jack's face in front of her, his tall and

hard. Little things first, so that I didn't notice really, and then it was like nothing was right, like nothing I could do was right, that I was the asshole for not living up to his expectations."

"Things haven't gone the way you've wanted since he left here, since you went to the West Coast," Sharon interjects and Elaine ignores her again.

"And that drives me right up the wall, you know? So I called him a self-righteous prick, which didn't go over well, and he yelled a bunch of vile and horrible things, the least of which was that I'm a selfish spoiled brat, and so I told him he just couldn't handle me and that what he really needed was a quiet, unresponsive cretin that would let him do whatever he wanted, and then just when I thought maybe we could talk it out, it all fell apart and he packed up and left."

Sharon shifts around uncomfortably on her counter perch. Her tea cup leaves brown-stained rings on the counter top. Her foot in the sink is wet from the faucet drips. The water is cold.

"Elaine, I still don't think I'm the right person . . ." she tries again.

"If not you, then who?" Her voice rises. "After four years, who knows him better than you do? Who else can I possibly talk to about this? What the hell did you do to him anyway?" Elaine lights another cigarette and quickly continues before Sharon could reply. "I mean, it looks like he wasn't satisfied or happy with you, or else he wouldn't have left, right? So what did you do to him?"

"Elaine, goddamn it..."

"No, really, Sharon. I don't know what I'm going to do now. But screw him, I don't care, really I don't. These past two months have been an eternity. You

couldn't possibly imagine what it's been like. Hey, none of them understand me, men don't even try as far as I can tell, and I just can't give a shit anymore."

Elaine coughs.

Sharon's jaw aches and she can feel her heart pounding. She jumps down from the sink and almost falls when she notices that her foot has fallen asleep. She hops across the room, stretching the telephone cord as far as it will go as she leans in the doorway, chewing a fingernail.

"Now you just listen one minute," she begins, her voice rising.

"No, you're probably right," Elaine cuts in quickly. "What do you know? You can't help. He dumped you for me, that's life in the big city and you don't know much about keeping things tight anyway."

Sharon's index finger is bloody where she bit the nail down to the quick. Looking at the blood, she turns from the doorway and marches across the kitchen. Her foot tingles and the annoyance shoots up her leg all the way to her hip.

"I don't need this from you tonight, Elaine," she says, her voice calmer than she feels. "Give it a rest."

She shakes slightly as she firmly but softly places the receiver down on the hook; and then she smiles as she realizes this is a first for her, she finally is the one to cut the connection.

Quarter past four and Sharon sits in the living room. She doesn't want so much to go back to sleep now; Elaine will probably call back again, and Sharon can't stop herself thinking long enough to fall back asleep anyway. Jack and Elaine and the day care center and firing people and next month's milk all blend in together to keep her awake, and she mulls it all over,

lanky body wound tightly, ready to spring off at the first sign of trouble.

When she thinks of him, as she does now, she always sees him playing guitar, smiling into the darkness of the cold and smoky coffee house, singing something just for her, perhaps even one of the songs he wrote for her. Sharon loved the coffee house, the warmth and the smoke and the never-ending music and conversation and people she felt at home with. Jack loved the coffee house, too; it was a place Elaine refused to go after she was thrown out for tap dancing on the tables and sitting on the bar.

Sharon knows Jack is a doer, not a talker. Problems never existed for him because he wouldn't confront them; in that respect he was too much like Elaine; his and Elaine's immediate, vehement dislike of each other Sharon expected. It was Jack's commitment to his beautiful, haunting music that first caught Sharon, and then later, Elaine. But although Jack and Elaine are alike in their refusal to confront their problems, they differ because Elaine never stays committed. Sharon has no such commitment difficulties. She tells herself she knows why Jack left for Elaine, but she really does not understand his defection.

"Idiots?" Sharon asks. "Who ..."

"Jack couldn't deal with me, I guess," Elaine interrupts. "They never can. Men think at first that I'm wonderful and different and then suddenly they realize that wonderful and different wasn't what they wanted and then the 'change Elaine' project starts. I thought Jack was different."

"Elaine, all things considered, I don't think I'm the right person to talk to about Jack," Sharon says.

Elaine ignores her. "Hey, I'm not going to change until I'm good and goddamn ready. But he tried so

thinking about the next step.

In the darkness, she automatically puts on a Dave Brubeck album; the soothing melodies drift softly in the background and she stands once again in front of the window, watching the dark street below. She has to search through the music Jack left behind before she finds her Brubeck album; she isn't feeling much like hearing Neil Young, Steely Dan, or Joni Mitchell, Loudon Wainwright III or Warren Zevon. Jack left so hurriedly; left so much behind. A few old jeans, a red bandanna he wore tied to a belt loop on his pants, some pieces of rawhide he used to make necklaces and rings; there is more stuffed carefully away in a box under the bed; there is ever more than that stashed behind the storage area above the bedroom closet, but Sharon can't bring herself to get rid of it. She has gone through it all, some nights when she cannot sleep, catalogued it in her mind, and she knows she should do something with it. She means to pack all his stuff up, move it out, ship it West; but can't find the courage to start.

No cars move yet in the street below her; night shift people still have two more hours to go. The *Globe* will come soon enough and maybe then she will make some coffee. She always drinks too much coffee when she talks with Elaine, when phone conversations last for hours and it takes Elaine so long to get to the real point, and then morning comes far too soon.

There was a morning sun that burned with an unaccustomed intensity each day of the long weekend she had spent with Jack three years ago in Pensacola. They flew down, spur-of-the-moment, for a four-day weekend and borrowed a friend's condo while he was away on a training mission from the Navy base. Jack

brought his guitar; Sharon her books; the days lasted forever she thought then, and she and Jack were happy. Elaine called that weekend, too, with another now forgotten crisis, throwing just enough discord into what had started out to be a carefree vacation. "Don't get your knickers twisted," Elaine told Sharon later when Sharon tried to confront her about the disruption. "You weren't much help anyway."

Another morning, years before when Sharon and Elaine still lived at home, Sharon remembered dad throwing Elaine out of the house for bringing that boy home to sleep with her; Sharon didn't see her until that afternoon, walking down Fairbank Street, across from the cemetery.

"Some people just don't have any sense of humor, do they?" Elaine said, and waved away Sharon's concern. "Of course I was careful. I'm always careful," then she shrugged her shoulders. "Besides, mom and dad don't matter, actually. What do I care about them or their money, or their house? Big deal. I've got friends. I don't need this crap. It's okay. Really, it's okay." But she was back home three nights later, laughing on the telephone in the kitchen, her dirty dishes piled up in the sink, her laundry in a pile by the cellar door.

Sharon's own laundry lay forgotten in a heap on the floor and Jack cradled her gently in his arms while she cried the morning after the big storm. Elaine ran Sharon's car off the road that night and destroyed the entire front end after Sharon told her she couldn't borrow the car. "It doesn't matter, really, Sharon," Jack said. "No one was hurt and we can fix your car. Don't fuss about Elaine. You know what she's like; you know she's not worth it." But it was Sharon who paid for the repairs to the car.

"Another screw up," Sharon whispers as she rocks. "Goddamn you, Elaine."

Wednesday's "food section" is about bread and Sharon tidily tears a recipe for maple oatmeal bread out from page 63. The dark brown coffee smell wafts through the kitchen, which is still almost dark except for a small 60-watt light that hangs shaded over the table. The dark circles under Sharon's eyes grow deeper with the sun's approach, still almost an hour away. She sips at the half-warm coffee and thinks about all those sick and coughing toddlers who will be waiting for her.

She folds the paper and throws it carefully behind her into the basket. She leans against the wall and runs her fingers through her hair, trying to decide if it would be better to call Elaine and get the cycle of phone calls over for the night, or to wait and let Elaine calm down so she can get to the real point. She looks at herself in the mirror hanging over the sink, wondering if she has time for a shower.

The day they were invited to the party on Prospect Hill, Elaine sat at attention in front of her mirror in the tiny room she commandeered for her own, a room that had at one time been Sharon's room. Elaine sat there for more than two hours, playing with her face and trimming her bangs until Sharon stood in throws the Diet Coke can into the recycle bin, and unplugs the coffee machine. She pads down the hallway and back into her bedroom, gently places her red glasses on the night stand where she can reach them first thing, and picks up the clock to reset her alarm. An extra half hour won't hurt, assuming that she'll be able to get to sleep after two cups of coffee, tea, and a Diet Coke in the middle of the night.

She gets into bed, adjusts the covers, and rolls over to face the wall when the phone rings again. She doesn't let it ring more than once before grabbing the receiver from the hook.

"You're going on longer than usual tonight, and I'm tired so can we get this over with please?" Sharon doesn't sound as short and angry as she feels.

"Sharon?"

Sharon sits up quickly, throwing the sheets and comforter to the side. She slides her legs out of bed, staring ahead of her into the blackness of her room, her heart thumping erratically, unable to speak.

"Sharon?" And there is a pause. "Sharon, it's Jack."

Sharon laughs low in her throat, a quiet laugh, one that isn't meant to be heard by anyone but her. Her hand goes out automatically for her glasses, and she bumps over both the clock and the picture sitting stoically side by side. The laugh turns into a cough, which catches in her throat, and she sits in the dark with her own little sharp pain.

"Jack," she says and stands up.

"Yeah, hi," he replies. There is another long pause because neither one knows just what to say next. And then they both begin together.

"I just finished talking to. . ."

"I wanted to get to you before ..."

"What are you . . ."

"I know it's late, it was a late gig tonight and ..."

"Sorry, you go first, "

"No, go ahead, you start. "

So they both wait again, Sharon nervously wiping her glasses on the bed sheets, wishing she had brought another can of Diet Coke home from the center that afternoon, wanting her heart to stop pounding.

"Sharon, I just wanted you to know." Jack tries

the doorway and pleaded with her one last time.

"Don't make a scene, Elaine," she begged. "Stay here and let me go to this party alone. Jack McAlister will be there and I want some time to talk to him alone. I don't need a little sister hanging around just this once please dear God Elaine!"

Elaine turned towards the doorway and a smile crept slowly across her face—a mere grin at first, it widened brightly to sunshine and then narrowed slyly to devilment. "Fat chance, sis," she said. "I need to see just what this Jack McAlister is that has you all juiced up. They never mean much to you. This one does. So I need a look-see. Don't sweat it, Shar; you'll never know I'm there."

"Let's get this show on the road," Sharon mutters as she punches in the eleven numbers that will connect her to Elaine in California. She taps her foot as she counts eight rings before Elaine picks up the phone. And Elaine has been waiting.

"How dare you hang up on me?" she shrills before Sharon can even say hello. "How goddamn rude of you! Things are going badly and I'm so hurt and all you can do is think about yourself when I need to talk to someone! I'm surprised at you Sharon, it's so unlike you! "

"Elaine "

"No, really, I guess I just don't matter a good goddamn to you so just go on back to bed and forget I even called."

"Elaine . . . "

"Sharon, there's nothing more to say. Just remember what you've done."

After listening for a few seconds to the dial tone, Sharon chuckles and hangs up the phone again,

again.

"Yes?"

"Elaine and I are done, finally. " Sharon imagines Jack, in a new apartment in California, pacing around the room, holding onto his portable phone, constantly raking back his long dark hair to keep it out of his eyes, stepping through the discarded sheet music, the broken guitar strings, the empty and dirty plates and cups, the old wine bottles, the ashtray with its mixture of Marlboro butts and roach-ends, newspapers and old magazines. She can see the black leather sofa and his orange and white long-haired cat perched in the hole in the center section where Elaine had jumped into it breaking the frame a few short months before she left for California. She imagines his Gibson strapped to his back by the rainbow colored guitar strap she shyly gave him on the first birthday they shared together; the Gibson is always close to him, closer than anyone. Sharon waits.

"You and I never talked, you know, Sharon," Jack says and she feels her throat constrict, and the tears start to poke out from the corners of her eyes. She blinks, hard, once and then twice, and swallows with difficulty.

"We weren't much for talking."

"For sure," he says. And she remembers all the afternoons they spent silently, making love, listening to his demo tapes, trying to write lyrics for his music, reading D.H. Lawrence novels, cooking spaghetti and throwing a few strands against the wall to see if it was done, and then making love some more. Lovely, silent afternoons. *What happened?* she thinks.

"Sharon, can we get together if I come out there?" Jack asks and she picks up the telephone and walks over to the window on the far side of the room. The

question is too quick, the time is too late, and she doesn't know how to answer.

"I really want this, Sharon, and I think you do, too," he continues, talking faster. "Goddamn it, Sharon, I think we really should talk, after all, you know, don't you think?"

Sharon laughs. She is thinking of Elaine and her phone calls. Elaine will call again tonight, and Sharon wonders what the calls are really about. She hears Jack's voice.

"Sharon? I'm coming back east. Can we talk?"

Can we talk? Can we share this ride to Crane's Beach? Can we change this last bar and arrange the words this way instead of that so that the song makes sense? Can we stay the night together, no one will know, I want you so much, can we stay? Can we stop analyzing Elaine? Can the cigarette butt burn a hole in this stain-resistant carpet and are we going to burn up and die and go to hell for doing things we shouldn't be doing?

All the silly serious questions from their past hover overhead now while Sharon tries to think. Four years. Two months. What Sharon and Jack bonded together so slowly and carefully Elaine and Jack tore apart so casually and lightly and it is now coming home to roost. And the unanswered question that could now, even this late, possibly be answered. If she wants it answered. If she thinks it's important enough. What a trio. Jack. Elaine. Sharon.

And after what seems to be a very long time, she finally says, "Of course," and more of the past comes rushing back to her. All the good past, because that's all people usually remember from failed love affairs. With sisters, the bad can sit at the front of the brain, to be remembered and relived over and over, never to be

forgiven; but with lovers, no matter how badly they've treated or been treated, with lovers it's always all the good that stays in the front.

"Of course," she says again, with a lighter voice. "Will you be here soon?"

A half-hour later she rolls over, clutching the covers closer to her, smiling in a half-awake state, and she reaches to shut off the alarm by her bed. The ringing continues, and her smile disappears as she wakes completely up and she reaches once again to the table to answer the telephone.

"Sharon hi. Now don't be all pissed, just be quiet and listen for a second, okay?" She hears Elaine drop the phone and murmur "Oh shit," in the background. "Wait, just wait a minute, would you, this is important, so just hold on."

Hearing Elaine's urgency, Sharon smiles.

"I'm done with this," Elaine announces with a deep smoky exhale. "It's been fun but I'm really not the California type, and this place is really creepy if you're not a native or know your way around. No, and I just can't study here, I can't work here, there's too much outside happening for me to concentrate. I've dragged this on long enough, I'm too old for this crap, but I want this damn degree and I won't get it here so I'm transferring to Emerson, they have what I want there and it's close to home so those are my plans. My flight leaves LAX at 11:20 this morning and my bags are packed and I've even shipped some of my books UPS so they'll come in next week 'cause I didn't want to pay extra for overnight delivery or anything. Thank Christ Jack's over and done with, cause that's easier for me and there are no other ties and shit I'll be glad to get out of here. I'm so excited--Isn't this absolutely great?"

Don't you think?" Elaine's voice rose as her enthusiasm poured over the receiver.

Sharon laughs into the phone.

"So I'll catch the shuttle from Logan out to Littleton and Delancey said he'd pick me up but he has no place for me to crash since Shelly threw him out. He's been hanging out anywhere he can, usually in his car. Sometimes I wish mom and the old man had stayed around when they retired, it would make life easier for me." Elaine pauses again. "So I'll just stay there with you since you're near the commuter rail and you've got tons of space, right?"

Sharon stares speechlessly at the phone in her hand. *So much strange news comes from the telephone, first thing tomorrow I'm getting it disconnected, she thinks.*

"Sharon? You're still there? Come on, Sharon."

Sharon frowns, takes a deep breath, and explodes. "You've got one hell of a nerve, Elaine! You call and harass me for over three hours and expect that I'll just listen to your shit and be nice, sweet, patient old Sharon. Well, goddamn it to hell, Elaine. Grow up! Life doesn't revolve around you. Other people have lives, too. Does that surprise you?"

Elaine doesn't answer. Sharon shrugs her shoulders and puts the receiver down on the night stand and she sits down on her bed. She sighs, and laughs to herself, another quiet laugh like the one she kept from Jack.

"This is insane," she announces, and picks the phone back up.

"Elaine . . ."

"Oh good, Sharon, I didn't think you'd hang up again." Elaine coughs. "Delancey will drop me off there in the evening but the time depends on when my plane gets in."

Sharon scratches her head. "You really should stop smoking, Elaine."

"I'll see you tomorrow," Elaine says.

Across Paterson

Sacha London

what little remains
 of the city held so closely—
only the river,
only the falls.

 across a stretch of
 sticky humming asphalt
flees the water . . .
singing down from
 above, it cleanses
 through and descends in a roar and a hush
to the sea,
 away from Paterson.

not much else to
see from above,
 from the heavens,
 or Route 80 east . . .

climbing slowly away
 as the red-hued sun
 nods and blinks a farewell and I,

I try to discern if there truly
 is a
 Beautiful Thing

or if that, too,
disappears below the horizon.

mother

Sacha London

mother I cried when
your skirt slipped away
 with the fleeting back end
as you bent to yet another
demanding child . . .

mother I cried when
the faces all emptied of color
 and none of them smiled
and the nights floated past
without maps,

and the voices were stilled.
long before the time was ready
 an anger dug deep into a
 well far below a wavering
 surface, well-fronted

but mother it's time past
and your words, well intended,
 fall on ears more unwilling
 to refuse to hear
 since they know the long silence,
 suddenly broken,

is too deadly,
 too costly,
 too dear.

new trees

Sacha London

he cut back the bushes
because I asked him
to, or maybe because
he volunteered.

the narrow pathway that
cried on rainy days and
bled on snowy ones,
 so close
one long branch could kiss
the other

suddenly widened in a
gap so great
the red bricks gasped
and drink in sunlight for
the first time in years.

uncovered, the cement step
lay cracked
and gaping now in front
of the door for all to
see . . .

and of course there were
the pennies,
still bright heads
up where they gather by
the side,
sun-warm and
gleaming so the kids can

pick them up.

wide open now, the path
leads out. those old bushes
ugly and deformed
with too tall pineapple
crowns and great inverted
Cs of stubby branches
 reach back aimlessly
 to clutch each fallen brother.

For Sarah

Steve Luttrell

In as much as
more is
often less than
what we
might expect

Let's resolve to
take what is given
when and where
that instance
might occur

Let's set no time
but take our time
in getting there.

Friends Apart

Elizabeth Cummings

We are the friends together in the world
all curled up with each other
Waiting patiently for the sun
While I make a bun in the hair
of the Unicorn
Gliding above the wind
We are pinned together for
always and forever as the
moon quickly forgets the sun
While the Unicorn dances fade
and the wind slowly breaks
The moon and the sun apart
and only at dawn may they might
be together

a poem

Lou Susi

thee other nite mee & theatre
roustabout
goat tinna wee tiny
fenda benda wee
were russians 2 get us
some bottle 'o' snake-eyes
at the billerica liquor store
a six pack
a quick pick
& a hard pack of marlburroughs
all before closing
& then
(uphand arounda bend
banjo bang banjo
backhand around again
banjo bob's banjo
upon thee rooftops wee found wear
our love stops)
bang
ting ting ting
u know what?
i gut thee walking pneumonia
i gut thee walking pneumonia
i lost my fucking kidney
i lost my fucking kidney
wanna know what i did with thee other one?

Retrospective

Linda Ashear

There were a lot of good parts. Grandma's wet kisses,
the twenty dollar bill I found in the pocket of my old gray coat,
The way my father, young, strong,
squeezed my hand on the long ride home,

the time I wrote *I love you* in the snow,
the August night I drove
with my blouse unbuttoned,
the window open wide,

the Cyclone in Coney Island, how I survived and knew
I would never have to do it again,
the cool \$200 I bet on a blackjack hand,
and watching the dealer turn over the ace.

So many good parts.
Like the pumpkin seed I planted
that produced a vine that jumped the fence
and left a thirty pounder on the lawn,

and the way my father, old, blind,
squeezed my hand on the long ride home.

George

Ken Provencher

George O'Donnell was with the Shawsheen Elementary School Band for three weeks before he realized that the only reason they had asked him to play the tuba was that he was fat. Stories about disasters connected with the heavy instrument had made the rounds for longer than that—the band members had horror stories for every instrument—but George became aware of his own role in tuba lore the minute he heard “And Jack was so skinny that . . .” A typical story went: “So after we went down Emory Street we turned on this wicked steep hill, and Derek tried to hold the tuba up so it wouldn’t drag him down. But the thing was so heavy it kept pulling him over, he looked like a hunchback, and the more he tried to lean back the more the thing wobbled in his hands and pulled him down even harder. So halfway down the hill he keeps going faster and faster to try and steady the tuba, and then it starts dragging him down even more so he goes even faster but that doesn’t work and by the time we’re at the bottom of the hill friggin Derek is running for his life with the tuba hanging off his neck and then finally he trips over and smashes the thing on the street and breaks about five ribs.” Then a few band members looked at George and laughed, “Derek was all wrong anyway.”

To George the tuba was a bizarre, scary instrument, and despite his bulk didn’t feel comfortable holding it at first. He wasn’t sure whether he should brace the horn with his palm or cradle it in his elbow; either way it felt cold and slippery. Former tuba players had been equipped with a balancing rod attached to their hips,

so their arms didn’t have to take all the weight.

George, however, was deemed wide enough to support the instrument on his own. His training was brief and chaotic: as a sixth grader he was required to be a member, and as soon as he walked into the school auditorium for signups the band leader, Mr. Berkowitz, called him over and offered him the tuba spot. George had to walk up and down the auditorium four times with the tuba on his back, and after a few modifications of hand placements and marching pace was given a rundown on the ten notes he had to play and blew them all to perfection before heading home. On the way he noticed the sign-up sheets hanging on the wall; the tuba had no other takers.

The purpose of the band had never been certain. Shawsheen was a navy town, with a shipyard serving as town square. Anything big that happened in Shawsheen had to do with submarine movements and overdue furloughs and the occasional drunken sailor. Any boy over seventeen who was physically fit ended up in the service, so every June Shawsheen High School had a combination graduation ceremony/military parade, with the elementary School providing background music. The band members weren’t pushed to perfect their craft or pursue music as a profession, and the group wasn’t intended as a student club or fraternity interest. The band had to march once a year and that was it. George wondered why the navy yard didn’t simply play rousing military music over the loudspeakers or hire a well-trained, professional band. “To be cute,” said his mother.

George’s ten notes on the tuba were spread throughout “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”—typically a Marine tune, but one of the few a pre-teen band could be expected to play. The notes came in two

sets of five: one in the beginning, one at the end. For most of the march around the navy yard he didn't have to do anything but walk steadily and keep the tuba balanced. As the other band members were constantly at work (except the cymbal clasher, who had his own problems with strong winds and sprained wrists), Mr. Berkowitz refused to let George carry the tuba without looking busy. "Keep your mouth on the blower. Never take it off."

"Why not?"

"If you take it off you'll dry the spit that's already on it, and if you can't come up with more spit you won't be able to blow on it any more."

George felt that the tuba, as a noisemaker, was overrated. During practices he'd blow as hard as he could, but the sound was never louder than those he could make with a kazoo or his own two lungs. He was confused that something so large could make so small a noise.

"Just like you," Miss Lane told him. George adored Miss Lane. She had come to Shawsheen as a part-time teacher for Title One classes, an assignment that made George envious of the dumber kids. If George had heard her name alone, he would have dreamed up a suitable goddess to match it. But Miss Lane existed, and this gave his dreams a workable, arousing image. She was much younger than the usual Shawsheen crowd; the contrast between her and the older teachers was in itself a sign of beauty and a connection with the students. George saw her, at most, fifteen minutes a week: glimpses of her coming and leaving, her short visits to his classes, a quick eavesdropping in the hallways. She had a small face and body, and long, red hair. She reminded him of the softer heroines out of comic books and cartoons, with flowing capes, high

skirts, and mouths glowing with lipstick. She was the ideal damsel in distress, and his daydreams of her always centered on chaotic rescues in fire and water—mostly water. One particular dream he liked to review and amend was of being with her alone in an enclosed, watery chamber; he imagined her in a loose white dress soaked in the surrounding waters and him close enough to touch it slowly and methodically.

Such affection was too much to keep to himself, so he dropped hints to his parents and manipulated his friends into talking about her. Soon he was so unruly he took a blue crayon from the supplies closet and wrote "I LOVE MISS LANE" about a dozen times in varying sizes on the concrete stairwell at the back of the school. Since an admission like this would humiliate him if anyone found out the author, he took his friend David to the spot and pointed, "I wonder who wrote all that."

"Probably you."

Rehearsals for the band continued through May. Two weeks before the ceremony Mr. Berkowitz led the group around the shipyard to check their pace in comparison to the music. The band began playing on the sidewalk outside the Elementary School and then headed down Fairfield Street as the drummers and trumpeteers belted out the first few bars: "From the halls of Montezoo-oomah . . ."

George didn't have to give his all during the rehearsal, but he did anyway. He wanted to make sure that the pressure applied by his mouth on the tuba, at full force, didn't push it forward any more than it needed to. He finished the first set of five notes before the band turned left onto Emory Street, which stretched behind the shipyard from end to end. George began to sweat in the middle of the block, and al-

though most of the others were also, they didn't have to keep their lips pressed against their instruments tight enough to cut off mouth breathing. He used his nose and prayed he wouldn't catch cold the night before the ceremony.

Emory took a right onto Charles, the ultimate test for any band. The street that cost Derek half a dozen ribs was a steep hill sloping downwards at roughly a sixty degree angle. (George knew the exact measurements, as did the whole band; they were part of its legend.) Nearly the size of two football fields, Charles Street would take the band to a sharp right turn leading to the shipyard entrance and the end of the song. Mr. Berkowitz was visibly anxious as the band swooped down without a hitch in either marching speed or musical pitch. Berkowitz saw this as a sinister portent: since nothing could top this rehearsal, the official march will be less than perfect, and anything less than perfect will jeopardize his chances for leading the band next year. Band leaders at Shawsheen Elementary had a steady turnover rate.

George synchronized his steps with the trumpeteers in front of him and blurted his remaining five notes, which halted the band at the navyyard entrance. Mr. Berkowitz praised his students—almost warning them about how good they were—and passed out the programs for the commencement. George took his mouth off the tuba and panted back to life, the sweat of the march raining down on his shirtfront. A nearby van slid open and Miss Lane helped Berkowitz load up the children and instruments. Berkowitz spoiled George's potential pleasure in talking to Miss Lane by taking the tuba himself and jamming it directly behind her seat in the van. George had to sit leaning against the back doors and stretch his neck to

hear Miss Lane and Berkowitz over the din of the other students. From what he could discern, Miss Lane would, well, *love* to help Berkowitz with the instruments after commencement, which meant that she would probably hear George blow his last five notes.

For the next two weeks George prepared for his performance with intense self-denial. He avoided Miss Lane whenever possible, so she wouldn't suspect he was trying to get too close; he didn't want any special attention, he wanted his tuba playing to speak for itself. To prevent any sickness he popped vitamin pills and swore off junk food. His mother thought he was trying to lose weight, and soothed him with facts on opera singers: "I've never seen a thin one, have you? The sound has to come from somewhere, right? So the bigger they are, the bigger the sound, I guess." George went around lifting heavy objects and was thrilled when his father needed help rearranging the basement.

On the day of commencement George took the longest shower of his life and sat in the bathroom, sweating profusely. He figured the more he sweat now the less he'd sweat later; his glands could only hold so much. Berkowitz brought him to the school at noon and oversaw the band's costuming. He frowned at the looseness of George's outfit and offered him a pillow to stuff down his shirt. George hemmed and hawed long enough to send Berkowitz away to help someone else.

The band formation was exactly the same as during rehearsal, only this time there was a small crowd of onlookers split on either sidewalk to watch the band go by. George stepped in front of the cymbalist and tooted his five notes on first cue. The band shuffled forward.

When the flutists began playing, every dog on the sidewalk barked loudly and ran out towards the band, only to be jerked back by the ends of their leashes. Small children straddling their parents' shoulders waved weakly at Berkowitz as he led the band down Emory Street twiddling his baton. "They're too loud!" a child cried, burying his face in his father's neck. A trombonist in front of George looked back at him and laughed, bleating his notes at an even shriller tone in response to the little critic. George would have laughed back if he didn't have to worry about keeping his mouth on the tuba blower.

The Emory Street crowd was much larger, and cheers went up at the sight of the head car in the parade: Chris Gagnon, the Shawsheen High School wrestling champ who'd one the state finals, was sitting in the back seat holding up two fingers. Gagnon's skills hadn't been totally developed; in fact, he won by the grace of being the most underdeveloped athlete in the tri-state area. No one else was small enough to challenge him in his weight class, so at every meet Chris would just show up, raise his hand, and win by forfeiture.

Near the end of Emory Street two six-year-olds had scrawled out a hopscotch design in chalk and gleefully played a few rounds as the parade advanced on them. George focused on them to keep from thinking how hot it was underneath his uniform, especially the tasseled hat that slipped over his forehead. He had to admit, though, that it absorbed most of his sweat. The tuba felt amazingly light, and his strides were high and wide, the very model of regimental marching procedure. He was momentarily distracted by a lemonade stand on the corner of Emory and Charles; he could feel his lips drying up against the brass blower. Two

older kids stood beside the stand passing a large glass of lemonade between them: "I dare you to throw it at him . . . I dare you—"

The cymbals clashed behind George, the hopscotch-playing children were dispersed, and the band turned slowly down Charles Street Hill.

Out of the corner of his eye George saw the teenagers at the lemonade stand hurl their glass at someone behind him. There was some commotion, but the band continued on; George had more pressing concerns anyway. With a heave that almost sent him reeling, George arched his back and put all the tuba's weight on his left hip. After five steps he shifted it over to his right hip, and again to his left after five more steps. He had counted twenty shifts during rehearsal, and kept his composure by reminding himself how many shifts remained.

His trombonist friend swung his instrument swiftly to the right. George thought it was another prank until the majorette behind the trombonist jumped to the side moments later. George was three paces behind the majorette, and braced himself for whatever was heading towards him.

It was a bee. George's load wasn't light enough for him to sidestep the insect, but he figured a little fast maneuvering would scare it away. His ankle twisted and his hat fell over his eyes, but the tuba was an effective counterbalance and kept him steady. The bee came at him again, as if fascinated with George's instrument. Is it because it's gold? George thought/ It reminds him of home? George shook his head violently. If he was stung he would surely scream, and with his mouth up against the tuba the scream would be heard for miles, Berkowitz would chew him out, and he'd be humiliated in front of Miss Lane. But he

couldn't simply lash out at the bee, since he's carrying so much weight. So George kept his eye on the circling insect, bearing in mind how close he was to the bottom of the hill. He could last thirty more steps. He could handle torture for that long.

Something brushed between his lips. He squeezed his mouth tighter on the blower and sucked whatever it was behind his teeth. He felt a faint vibration against the inside of his cheek. The bee had flown into his mouth through the horn.

George closed his throat and his eyes, breathing deeper through his nose. He refused to gulp down a live bug right before his next set of notes. The thing buzzed around his soft palate, tickling the roof of his mouth. The sensation was unbearable.

His fears were alleviated somewhat when he heard the music build up to his second cue. By now the band was turning into the shipyard entrance, and would stop at his signal. Just one more stanza, no, fifteen notes, ten notes. George ran the entire piece through his head in the time it took one note to blend into the next. The bee was fiddling around with his tongue now, itching down to the back of his throat. When George's cue mercifully came, he lifted his shoulders, inhaled deeply, and blew the bee out of the tuba the same way it came in.

The note got everyone's attention, and George was so relieved to see the dead bee fly into the majorette's hair that he blew the next four notes just as loudly. There was much applause, and the band seemed to get its second wind, riding with the enthusiasm. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" had a spectacular finish. Even the dogs were silent. George wasn't aware of the effect he had on the parade until he saw Miss Lane's head poke out of the van near the entrance and give him a look.

Berkowitz directed the band into the van and got in beside Miss Lane. As George was about to step in behind her he saw the two adults share a brief kiss. "Nice job," she told the band leader. Berkowitz laughed and spun around in his seat to face George. "No," he said, holding out his hand. "This kid. Nice job." George shook Berkowitz's hand, triumphant, and then saw it slip into one of Miss Lane's. "Come on, Berk, we get first crack at the food." And, as if to punish George, they kissed again.

Contributors

Linda Ashear's poems have appeared on many literary magazines, including *The Bellingham Review*, *Without Halos*, *The Connecticut River Review*, and *Footwork*. Her first book of poetry, *Toward the light*, was published in 1989. She served as managing editor of *The Croton Review* from 1984-1989.

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Sacha London lives in a small town in central Massachusetts with two young sons, a part-time next door neighbor who masquerades as her boyfriend, tree assorted cats, and an unknown quantity of soon-to-be-born kittens. She has been writing poetry for a number of years and has had her poems and stories published—under an assumed name—in many literary journals.

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Shirley Warren was born in Absecon, New Jersey. She received her MFA at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina. She is the founding editor of Still Waters Press, author of two poetry collections, *Oyster Creek Icebreak* (1989) and *Somewhere Between* (1991), and a Visiting Poet for the New Jersey State Council on the Arts' Writers in the Schools Program. Her poems have appeared in close to one hundred literary journals.

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Tom Vanderhoeven loves nothing more than taking pictures and giving them to us to use for covers of *The Pearl*. His ultimate goal is to have his photographs on the covers of every literary journal in the country.

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